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Building Identity: The Miami Freedom Tower and the Construction of a Cuban American Identity in the Post-Mariel Era

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Building Identity: The Miami Freedom Tower and the Construction of a Cuban American Identity in the Post-Mariel Era

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2012

Acknowledgements

There are, of course, many people whose help made this project possible. First and foremost, I'd like to thank my primary advisor, Dr. Cary Cordova. Your cheerful support throughout this project was more helpful than you can imagine, and your insightful comments and suggestions never failed to strengthen both my writing and my resolve. I also benefitted greatly from the teaching and scholarship of my second reader, Dr. Martha Menchaca, whose research and teaching style were helpful in numerous ways. My boss, Dr. Jess Miner, gave me some great writing advice at crucial stages of the project, and helped to keep me sane during an otherwise crazy semester.

Many thanks, too, to the entire Department of American Studies. Conversations both inside and outside the classroom with students, faculty, and staff were invaluable both personally and professionally. Thanks in particular to my cohort: our sing-alongs, happy hours, and field trips have provided some much-needed breaks, and I can't thank you all enough for your friendship these past two years.

Abstract

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The Miami Freedom Tower was built during the 1920s and then used during the 1960s as a processing center for newly arriving Cuban refugees. This report will demonstrate the ways in which a particular, powerful segment of the Cuban American community used the tower as a means to establish for themselves a more positive, Euroamerican identity in the wake of the Mariel boatlift and in the context of national debates over immigration in the 1980s and 1990s. By first looking at the U.S. government's establishment of Cuban American identity during the early Cold War as positive and ideologically aligned with the United States and then examining the ways in which that identity was challenged in the 1980s and 1990s, this report demonstrates that national and ethnic identities are constantly in flux. Further, it is necessary to break down and fully analyze the ways in which the identities of immigrant groups are framed both externally by the press, popular culture, and the government and internally by their own goals, conceptions, and histories.

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"Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else."

— Italo Calvino[1]

Rising more than sixteen stories above Biscayne Boulevard, the Miami Freedom Tower pierces the city skyline, its Spanish Renaissance-style exterior holding its own amongst the modern, streamlined towers of a not-so-distant downtown. From below, the tower's yellow and white façade overpowers the street, casting shadows in every direction and forcing the eye upward toward its culminating cupola (Figure 1). Historically, too, the tower stands out. Initially constructed in 1925 to house the *Miami Daily News*, the building has been at different times government-operated, privately owned, severely neglected, and selectively restored. Today, this singular structure stands as an official monument to the Cuban exile experience, a declaration of Miami's status as an international city and an indicator of the large Cuban presence in South Florida.[2] What, though, does it mean to designate a monument to exile? Why did the push for the preservation and commemoration of the tower emerge in the 1990s, and what does it reveal about the national, ethnic, and racial hierarchies of a self-consciously transnational

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1 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (Orlando: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1974), 44.

2 Ellen Uguccioni and Caridad de la Vega, "National Historic Landmark Nomination: Freedom Tower" (Washington: National Park Service, 2007), 4, 26.

city?[3] For the foreign-born population of Miami is not solely or even overwhelmingly Cuban: the city is home to substantial populations of migrants from all over South and Central America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Europe.[4] Though markers of other national identities dot the cityscape, no other national group has a monument this striking, this central to the skyline. The inclusion of the Freedom Tower among the businesses and banks at Bayside Marketplace and the courthouses and cultural institutions on Biscayne Boulevard is a physical, concrete assertion of the Cuban community's place within the cultural, political, social, and economic histories of the city.

The story of the Miami Freedom tower is, in many ways, the story of the Cuban community in Miami; its changing symbolic meaning reflects the shifting nature of el exilio.[5] It is important, then, to consider the implications of this story. Specifically, it is essential to consider how conceptions of race and ethnicity in both Cuba and the United States contribute to and complicate the popular narratives constructed around the tower and the Cuban American community. Often, as Sheila L. Croucher notes, the "Cuban success story"—the media-reinforced tale of the exceptional political and economic success of the Cuban immigrant population—is seen as proof that so-defined "minority" groups are capable of succeeding within an increasingly less biased United States society.

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3 For the purposes of this paper, "Miami" will be used as it is in colloquial, and not strictly geographic, discussions of South Florida. The city of Miami itself is rather small, and so "Miami" has become shorthand for the larger political entity of Greater Miami-Dade County, which encompasses a number of independent municipalities but also operates as a governing body in its own right and directly oversees a number of unincorporated areas throughout the county.

4 Guillermo J. Grenier and Alex Stepick III, introduction to *Miami Now!: Immigration, Ethnicity, and Social Change,* edited by Guillermo J. Grenier and Alex Stepick III (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992), 1-16.

5 El exilio is the common term used to describe the state of Cuban exile

What this trope fails to take into account (aside from the idea that this assertion leaves out large, struggling portions of the Cuban American community) is the very important fact that structures of oppression also exist *within* minority communities, and that in a city largely populated by migrants from another region, the structural biases of that region are often reproduced and reinforced within the new community.

As recent scholarship on trans-Atlantic histories has demonstrated, the same colonial processes and systems that created lasting inequalities in the United States created lasting and pervasive inequalities elsewhere in the Atlantic world, Cuba included.[6] Latin America is clearly not a region free of social stratification, and those hierarchies do not break down at the border. As an examination of the Miami Freedom Tower's application to become a National Historic Landmark will demonstrate, these hierarchies can become even more powerful as a new immigrant group attempts to place itself within the racial and ethnic constructs of the United States. Unaware that such constructs exist elsewhere, people in the United States then assign a pan-Hispanic identity to all Spanish-speaking migrants and assume that each migrant can be said to speak for the group as a whole. In this same way, people tend to discuss the Miami Freedom Tower as though it is a monument to diversity and acceptance, a monument to a Spanish-speaking immigrant group's ability to make a home in the United States. Viewing the tower in this simple way and placing Cuban migrants within the simply

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6 For more information on the field of Atlantic history, see: Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Frank Andre Guridy, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

constructed framework of a pan-Hispanic identity, however, ignores the complicated racialized social structures that exist within the Spanish-speaking countries from which many new migrants to the United States move. As Martha Menchaca demonstrates in her groundbreaking 2001 work *Recovering History, Constructing Race: The Indian, Black, and White Roots of Mexican Americans*, universally assigning to one national group a consistent racial or ethnic identity can sometimes conceal the complicated racialized structures and policies that comprise a national group in the first place.[7] Nations are knotty, convoluted entities, and the movement of national populations serves to complicate, not simplify, categories of identity. Further, those stratifications and prejudices present in the nation of origin mix and mingle with the stereotypes and preconceptions present in the United States, which at times may dilute the strength of certain stigmas but often serves to intensify them.

As the case of the Miami Freedom Tower shows, in a city—and, increasingly, a nation—where "racial" boundaries are blurred, the old signifiers of race break down and are less capable of describing the complexities of immigrant populations. Essentially, the Freedom Tower as a publicly expressed vision of Cubanidad disrupts the notion of the existence of a unified "Hispanic" identity and begs for a better, more comprehensive, thoughtful, and careful conception of immigrant communities as distinct entities, each with its own histories, desires, and pre-existing social structures. Just as the claim that the Miami Freedom Tower represents the entirety of Miami's Cuban population serves to

7 Martha Menchaca, *Recovering History, Constructing Race: The Indian, Black, and White Roots of Mexican Americans* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

repress the voices of those whose histories are not linked to the building, the claim that the Spanish language unites an entire group of people under one ethnic banner creates and reinforces hierarchies of power within the Spanish-speaking population.

The official history of the Miami Freedom Tower, then, which purports to tell the story of Cuban migration as a whole but in reality reflects the experiences of the whiter, wealthier Cubans of a higher socioeconomic status who composed the most visible group of pre-Mariel migrants, thus reinscribes the primacy of a particular, powerful segment of the Cuban migrant population and reifies and reestablishes that group's dominance even within the new context of the United States. So, in the designation of the Freedom Tower as an official site of historic significance, it is important to consider whose history is privileged and, as a result, whose is erased. Monuments are sites for the preservation of meticulously constructed memories and preserve a very particular version of history. They are places where history is both constructed and constricted. In *The History of Forgetting,* Norman M. Klein discusses how architecture often serves to reinforce a particularly constructed public memory.[8] With the Miami Freedom Tower, the public memory that is constructed is the idea that Cuban American identity is defined and dominated by the white and wealthy migrants that immigrated to the United States prior to the Mariel boatlift and who are unified both ideologically and socioeconomically.

What is dangerous about this is that architecture has the potential to be so permanent, can create memory so pervasive that its fabricated myths become assimilated

8 Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (New York: Verso, 1997).

truths. If the myth of a wholly white and united community persists and is encoded into the architecture of the cityscape, what is to become of those whose identities and histories fail to fit within this mold? As Sheila L. Croucher writes, "image is not merely smoke screen to be penetrated by the social science in its rigorous pursuit of empirical reality; image is reality, and reality is image, and both are in a constant state of flux."[9] The Freedom Tower, as both an image in itself and an assertion of a specific, mythologized image of a people, thus has the power to become reality, to change perception and formally encode exclusionary social structures. This is especially significant in a multinational city like Miami, but, as Croucher also notes, this is increasingly significant as the United States as a whole becomes more entrenched in its ideas of what it means to migrate from a Spanish-speaking country and as those immigrants become a larger portion of United States society.

Beginning with a brief history of the post-Castro exodus, this report will first establish how early waves of Cuban migration, though demographically varied and nuanced, came to be seen as dominated by white, wealthy, ideologically motivated migrants. Then, diving into the media firestorm surrounding the Mariel boatlift and immigration in general in the 1980s, we will see how this early identity was challenged and how, as a result, large segments of people from the prior waves of the Cuban exile community attempted to reassert the primacy of their own previously established positive identity. Finally, by examining the rhetoric surrounding the designation of the Miami

9 Sheila M. Croucher, *Imagining Miami: Ethnic Politics in a Postmodern World* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1997), 195.

Freedom Tower as a National Historic Landmark, this report will demonstrate how a specific, powerful segment of the Cuban American community attempted to define for itself a more European-linked identity in the 1990s and beyond. Underlying this discussion is the framework established by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, in which race is a flexible and constantly in flux set of constructs that serves very particular purposes and operates in pervasive but elusive ways.[10] Race, they argue, is something that is always being recreated and contested. Only by thinking about racial, ethnic, and national identities in this fluid way is it possible to understand the complicated identity conflicts within the Cuban American community in the years following the Mariel boatlift. Members of the Cuban American community that left Cuba in the first two waves of post-Castro migration used the Miami Freedom Tower as a means to establish distance between themselves and other Spanish-speaking immigrant groups, Mariel migrants included. The subtle actions of these established, powerful Cuban Americans demonstrate both the power of racial perceptions and the danger of ignoring the significant social stratifications that exist within so-defined "minority" communities.

10 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Building Exile: Cuban Migration and Cuban American Identity Before Mariel

In the years following Castro's entry into power and prior to the Mariel boatlift, Cuban exiles in the United States—defined by policymakers, those in the media, and within their own community as ideologically and socioeconomically unified—rejected proposals to establish an official public history. As this section will show, during these first decades of Castro's regime in Cuba, Cuban Americans had neither the need nor the desire to define for themselves a particular place or group identity within the United States as a whole because they believed their exile to be temporary, because the national image of Cuban migrants was primarily positive, and because they perceived themselves to be a demographically aligned group. It was only later, in the wake of Mariel and after the identity of Cuban migrants was challenged on a broader national scale, that a formal designation of a specific identity, in the form of the Miami Freedom Tower's preservation as a National Historic Landmark, became necessary.

When dictator Fulgencio Batista fled Havana on that fateful day in 1959, the ensuing Cuban exodus to Miami was, at first, nothing new. As Joan Didion remarks in her landmark book *Miami,* Florida had long been "that part of the Cuban stage where declamatory exits are made, and side deals," suggesting that Florida had for many decades been both a short-term refuge and vacation spot for wealthy Cubans. Exiled poet José Martí campaigned in Florida, she notes, and in the years prior to Castro's takeover countless power struggles on the island involved some party or other's temporary remove

to Miami.[11] And so, at first, the 1959 migrations from Cuba appeared to fall into this established category of relatively small-scale, temporary exile. However, as Richard R. Fagen, Richard A. Brody, and Thomas J. O'Leary make clear in their 1968 demographic study of the Cuban exodus, "what began as a trickle of Cuban refugees into the United States in 1959 was, by the middle of 1962, a small flood."[12] Because the radical nature of Castro's takeover only became widely apparent after an initial period of general acceptance and because flights between Cuba and the United States were fairly commonplace until the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, migration from the island at this early moment was slow and, on the whole, markedly different than later migrations would prove to be.[13]

Throughout this early period, the Miami Freedom Tower, then still referred to as the "News Tower," was a fairly generic commercial space with a mundane and unexceptional story: after the *Miami Daily News* vacated the building in 1957, the New York-based Maidmore Realty Corporation purchased the tower and leased the space to various temporary tenants.[14] Once the Kennedy Administration passed the 1962 Refugee Assistance Act, however, the building assumed a more important role as the processing center for newly arriving Cuban refugees. Because this migration was supported and

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11 Joan Didion, *Miami* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 12; Grenier and Stepick, 85.
12 Richard R. Fagen, et al., *Cubans in Exile: Disaffection and the Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), 62.
13 In January of 1961, the United States officially broke ties with Castro's Communist government. Between 1962 and 1965, when direct transportation between the two nations was forbidden, immigration continued but did so in a slower and less official manner. This changed in December of 1965, when the governments of Cuba and the United States agreed to allow for an orderly airlift of Cuban citizens to the U.S.
14 Uguccioni and de la Vega, 20.

partially sponsored by the United States government and because of the incredible scale of the migration, it was necessary to establish official institutions to aid in the processing and settlement of the refugees. This establishment of the newly renamed Freedom Tower as an official place of refugee assistance reflected a shift in the United States' policy toward the island and its emigrant population during the escalating Cold War. True to the ethos of the Cold War-era U.S. government, the Cuban exiles were granted political asylum and given a special, privileged status among immigrant and refugee groups.[15]

Crucially, these early migrants were defined as allies in the fight against Communism. As Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick note in their book *City on the Edge*, "The Miami exiles were not an ethnic group but an important ally in the fight for Cuba and Latin America" in the ongoing struggle against Communism.[16] In other words, the United States government never viewed or treated the Cuban migrants as they did other immigrant groups, and never assigned to them the status of an ethnic immigrant population. Rather, they were approached as partners in the Cold War and given a powerful political voice in the United States, a voice that would reverberate into the present.

Since the Cuban community at this time was assigned a primarily positive identity, it was unnecessary to use the tower as a means of projecting and preserving an identity separate from the identity assigned to other Spanish-speaking migrants. Only later, when the national conversation surrounding Cuban migrants became more negative,

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15 Grenier and Stepick, 86.
16 Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 30.

did the early post-Castro migrants decide it was necessary to promote the positive, Cold War-derived image of themselves as a group demographically aligned with the United States majority. So, when the Cuban Assistance Center in the Miami Freedom Tower was closed in 1974 and was, for a time, ignored by the volatile and intensely political Cuban exile community in Miami. In fact, in 1976, the then-owner of the building, Sam Polur, offered to sell the property to the exile community, who greeted the idea with disinterest. Throughout Miami's tumultuous 1970s and 1980s, the deed to the building changed hands a number of times and, though the tower was officially placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, it was not yet used as a memory site in any official capacity.[17] Cuban Americans, at the time, simply had no use for such a site.

It is important here to remember that memory itself is often constructed, sculpted in a particular fashion at a particular time in order to serve a particular need. Discussing the role of architecture in forming a collective social imaginary, Klein notes that the rhetoric surrounding nostalgic architecture often "builds the unremembered."[18] Essentially, fictional, nostalgic versions of history are created when the needs of the present necessitate a specifically mythologized past. At this moment in history, after Castro came to power but before the longevity of his reign was evident, the Cuban community in Miami was not looking to construct the memory of itself in Miami but was, rather, still hoping to return to a remembered Cuba, and so creating the Freedom Tower as a memory site was not seen as important or even pertinent.

17 Uguccioni and de la Vega, 7.
18 Klein, 11.

In this moment, the politics of the present were what mattered and things like buildings and monuments and official memory in Miami faded into the background. Francisco "Pepe" Hernandez, co-founder and sometimes president of the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF, established in 1981), remarked in a recent interview that the Cuban exile establishment in the 1980s very much believed that its communal purpose was the reestablishment of democracy in Cuba: "In the 80s…[we] thought that Cuban freedom was going to come directly by our efforts, the efforts of the exile community."[19] These, in short, were years in which the attention of the Cuban exile community in Miami was focused on Havana itself, on the politics of la patria and on the interactions between the homeland and the land of their temporary host. During this time, the exile community was, though in Miami, still of and for Cuba. To build a memory site in Miami, then, would have been to go against the official doctrine of the CANF and other Cuban exile organizations in that it would have acknowledged that the stay in Miami was not a temporary remove but a more permanent, lasting condition. To set literal roots in a community outside of the island, to create an official memory outside the bounds of the homeland and then to codify that memory in such a conspicuous public structure, was just not something that made sense within the ideology of the exile community during the 1970s and 1980s.

Equally important was that the Cuban community in Miami at this time believed itself to be unified by more than just ideology and a common purpose. Demographic

19 Jordan Melnick, "Didion's Miami Part II: Francisco 'Pepe' Hernandez Interview," *Beached Miami*, September 27, 2010, http://www.beachedmiami.com/2010/09/27/didions-miami-part-ii-francisco-pepe-hernandez-interview.

studies compiled by the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida reveal that the majority of these early émigrés were considered to be of a particular class and, more importantly, both policymakers and the media in the United States crafted and perpetuated an image of these early migrants as educated, wealthy, politically active, and primarily white.[20] Of course, this was not actually the case; many of these first and second wave Cuban migrants did not fit within this mold. As Susan Greenbaum, Frank Guridy, Evilio Grillo, and others have demonstrated, migration between Cuba and the United States has always been diverse, and Cubans of all skin tones and socioeconomic classes have always been part of the Cuban American community.[21] Additionally, even early post-Castro migrants were racialized in their own particular way. As Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez notes in *José Can You See? Latinos On and Off Broadway*, popular entertainment culture constructed "Latin" identity as something peculiar and other, but did so in a way that made that difference exotic and desirable.[22]

The U. S. government and the news media similarly attempted to portray early post-Castro migrants in a uniformly desirable manner. As Cheris Brewer Current argued in her 2010 work *Questioning the Cuban Exile Model: Race, Gender, and Resettlement 1959-1979*, the United States government, in order to make palatable to U.S. citizens its decision to welcome and support Cubans wishing to flee Communist Cuba in the wake of

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[20] Thomas D. Boswell and Manuel Rivero, *Bibliography for the Mariel-Cuban Diaspora* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1988), 1-16.

[21] Susan Greenbaum, *More than Black: Afro-Cubans in Tampa* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002); Evelio Grillo, *Black Cuban, Black American: A Memoir* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2000); Guridy, *Forging Diaspora*.

[22] Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, *José, Can You See?: Latinos on and Off Broadway* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).

the 1959 revolution, made a conscious effort to emphasize the exceptionalism, uniformity, and desirability of the newly arriving refugees. These immigrants were deemed allies in the fight against Communism and said to be "model" immigrants aligned ideologically and socioeconomically with dominant groups in the United States, a designation that remained unchallenged until the Mariel boatlift of the early 1980s.[23]

Cuban American migrants in these early years were thus portrayed in a privileged way. Because it was important within the context of the Cold War for the United States to assist anti-Communist Cubans and because the majority of those in the first two waves of Cuban migration were wealthier to begin with, Cuban American identity was initially presented as being distinct and separate from the specifically racialized identities of other Spanish-speaking migrants. It is not shocking, then, that the Mariel boatlift and the media debate surrounding immigration in the 1980s and 1990s would force these early Cuban migrants to reassert a positive identity and to claim that this identity defined what it meant to be a Cuban migrant. It was from this impulse that the Miami Freedom Tower was designated a National Historic Landmark.

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[23] Cheris Brewer Current, *Questioning the Cuban Exile Model: Race, Gender, and Resettlement, 1959-1979* (El Paso: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2010), 1-23.

A Challenge to Identity: The Mariel Boatlift, the National Debate over Immigration, and the Changing Perception of Cuban Americans

The establishment of the Miami Freedom Tower as a monument and museum, then, reflects both an internal shift in ideology and an external shift in national perceptions of Cuban identity. The tower is a literal attempt to mark a specific segment of the community's contributions to the political, economic, and cultural life of modern Miami and is simultaneously a metaphor for the Cuban exile community's incorporation into—and transformation of—the institutional character of South Florida. Equally important, though, is that this transformation occurred alongside another very public transformation of Miami: the perceived demographic shift of its immigrant population. Specifically, the Mariel boatlift and the ensuing media firestorm surrounding the "crisis" of these newly arrived refugees refocused attention on South Florida's Cuban and Cuban-American populations and forced both the community and the nation to reconsider previously constructed notions of Cuban identity. Especially important to this consideration is the way in which the perceived racial identity of Cuban migrants had changed in the years since the early waves of Cuban immigration.

This desire to encode an official version of Cuban identity, though radically different from the policies of the prior decades, is thus not incomprehensible. With the angst of a continued exile, the acceptance of Miami as a home they helped construct, and, most importantly, the shifting demographics of the Cuban exile community in the years following the Mariel boatlift, came a shift in attitudes, tactics, and politics that allowed

the exile community to accept and assert its position in the city and opened the door for the creation of public memory sites like the Miami Freedom Tower.

After more than three decades in exile, the Cuban community had changed in ways both subtle and obvious. Prior to these years, the intent and the focus was always a return to a free Cuba, a Cuba without Castro where the exiles could reclaim the lives they lost and restore what they believed was the rightful political order in Havana. But by the end of the twentieth century and at the dawn of the twenty-first, most Cuban exiles had spent more than half their lives in el exilio. As Gustavo Pérez Firmat describes in *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way,* many had never even seen the island of their parents' birth, and to this aged and changing population it seemed that Miami, not Havana, was home.[24] As the Cuba of their imagination became ever further removed in history and memory, Miami became the site in which exile identity was defined—in relation to a foregone homeland, of course, but firmly grounded in the sands of South Florida.

Reflective of this change, in 1997, Jorge Mas Canosa, founder and then-president of the CANF, purchased the Freedom Tower with the intention of turning it into a monument that would commemorate post-Castro Cuban migration and the ensuing exile experience. The continued renovation and restoration of the tower lasted until 2002, and in 2005 the Miami Freedom Tower was donated to Miami-Dade College, where it was recently converted into a non-commercial space to be used as an exhibition area, banquet

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[24] Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

hall, gallery space, and eventual museum. Of the tower at this time, Jorge Mas Santos, son of Mas Canosa, commented, "For Cuban exiles, the tower represents something similar to Ellis Island…it's a symbol of freedom. We wanted to leave a permanent structure that would speak to our history and be a symbol for people fleeing from a totalitarian regime. It is also a testament to the greatness of this country and its willingness to welcome us with open arms." [25]

Mas Santos' desire to leave a 'permanent structure' is significant in many ways, not least because it indicates for the first time a desire on the part of Cuban Americans to identify themselves as belonging in a significant and long-lasting way to the fabric of the cityscape. Interesting, too, is his comparison to Ellis Island, his eagerness to relate the building to a highly resonant, known, and European-linked immigration site. In this way, Cuban migration is akin not to migration from the Americas to the south but to the historical migration from Europe. In this way, Mas Santos subtly attempts to redefine Cuban identity as itself more Western.

Crucially, this identity is also defined in relation and reaction to increasingly negative media portrayals of both the broader Spanish-speaking immigrant community and the more specific identity of the Cuban Mariel refugees. In April of 1980, Fidel Castro announced that those who wished to leave Cuba would be allowed to do so via the port at Mariel. Following this announcement, countless Cubans residing in the United States rented, purchased, or chartered boats intended to retrieve their friends and family members who wished to leave the island, and a similar flurry of activity took place on the

[25] Uguccioni and de la Vega, 9.

island itself. After a short time, however, it became clear to both Castro and the wider watching world that more than a small number of Cubans were dissatisfied with life under the Castro regime, and so Castro, in an attempt to deflect the negative publicity, began loading these boats with a disproportionate number of people he claimed to be criminal, terminal, or otherwise undesirable.[26] Political scientist Gastón A. Fernández, analyzing the origins of the Mariel stigma, notes that Cubans wishing to leave the island were forced to make public declarations of their own supposed "deviance and criminality," a spectacle that "reinforc[ed] the status and power of party loyalists over the migration."[27] Through this spectacle, Castro's government created and then perpetuated the idea that these refugees were undesirable and were not leaving Cuba because of their dissatisfaction with the regime but, rather, because they were somehow deranged or otherwise outside the norm. The United States media then latched onto this manufactured stigma, issuing uncontested and uncritical reports about the supposed criminality of the less wealthy and noticeably darker Mariel refugees.

However exaggerated the reports of difference between the refugees of 1980 and those that preceded them, demographic data does reveal that there were a few noticeable distinctions between the groups. An analysis of data performed by Juan M. Clark in 1981 revealed that, while 22.2% of émigrés leaving Cuba between 1959 and 1974 were of the "professional and semi-professional managerial" class, only 8.6% of those who migrated during the Mariel months could be considered to be of the professional or managerial

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[26] Alex Larzelere, *The 1980 Cuban Boatlift* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1988).
[27] Gastón A. Fernández, *The Mariel Exodus: Twenty Years Later, A Study on the Politics of Stigma and Research Bibliography* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2002), 24.

classes. Mariel migrants were also much more heavily male (70% male, as compared to 42% of the 1959-1974 group), younger on the whole, and much more likely to be single. Additionally, 20-40% of these new migrants were categorized as being non-white.[28] Of course, this sort of data must be taken with caution and analyzed with a critical eye: conditions on the island itself had changed during those years, and categories of race and class are fluid, flexible, and constantly evolving.

The point, though, is that people—whether in the press, the data center, or the general public—*perceived* the migrants to be a certain way: poor, uneducated, unstable, and dark-skinned. Regardless of the inevitable nuance and fluctuation within the Mariel group, media coverage of the boatlift was dominated by images of seemingly poorer, darker refugees huddled on the decks of crowded, salt-stricken boats. Reporters also picked up the story that Castro was purposefully populating the boats with the so-called dregs of Cuban society: the institutionalized, the poor, the criminal, the terminally ill. And, although scholars have in recent years challenged this media-perpetuated notion that the majority of the so-called marielitos were criminal, insane, and impoverished, the image of the marielito as such remained a powerful one for much of the 1980s and early 1990s.

This challenge to and media redefinition of Cuban identity in the United States was not received well by those who left Cuba in the first migratory wave. Mercedes Cros Sandoval, the former director of the Cuban and Puerto Rican Units of the Catchment

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28 Juan M. Clark, Jose L. Lasaga, and Rose S. Reque, *The 1980 Mariel Exodus: An Assessment and Prospect* (Washington, D.C.: Council for the Inter-American Security, A Special Report, 1981).

Area IV Community Health Program, wrote of the general attitude of pre-Mariel Cubans toward the new migrants in the 1980s. "Our clients," she remembers, "resented and complained about the Marielitos whom they perceived as irresponsible, inconsiderate, ungrateful and too demanding."[29] Mirta Ojito, herself a Mariel-era Cuban migrant, remembers the stigma that came with being a Mariel-era migrant: "Being a *marielita* specifically is different to being a Cuban in Miami…I can't deny that I left Cuba in 1980, and that sets me apart from other people that came here at the beginning of the Revolution…A lot of people didn't understand us, didn't care for us, we were different. We were darker. Some of us were black, poorer people, working class." [30] Ojito here reveals a crucial point: that Mariel migrants were defined as different because of their race and their socioeconomic status. An anonymous Cuban gas station owner, interviewed by *Time* magazine in 1981, confirms the disdain many Cubans felt toward the Mariel refugees: "I tell my employees that if a black comes here asking for money, give it to him. If an Anglo comes to rob us, give it to him. But if a marielito comes here, kill him. I will pay for everything." [31] Clearly, significant tension existed between the Mariel migrants and portions of the already established Cuban American community. Popular culture and the media did little to mediate this tension between the marielitos and the earlier Cuban migrants; on the contrary, media representations of the Mariel migrants exacerbated the disdain both the older migrants and many in the broader United States

29 Mercedes Cros Sandoval, *Mariel and Cuban National Identity* (Miami: Editorial SIBI, 1986), 13.
30 Lynn Geldof Cubans (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 297.
31 James Kelly, "South Florida: Trouble in Paradise," *Time*, November 23, 1981.

public had for this new wave of immigrants, and did so primarily by playing on pre-existing racially or socioeconomically based stereotypes.

All of this occurred within a broader national conversation about Miami and about immigration in general. At the onset of the 1980s, Miami was caught in a perfect storm of negative publicity. In 1981, a *Time* magazine cover story famously declared Miami to be a "Paradise Lost," claiming that the city was overwhelmed by crime, drugs, and corruption. Partially a reaction to Mariel and the Liberty City Riots (an intensely violent series of race riots throughout May of 1980 that centered in the African-American and Afro-Caribbean dominated neighborhood called Liberty City) of the previous year, the article painted the picture of a city in peril.[32] Most importantly, the peril was of a particular order—immigration and race were the central players in this drama, and the depiction of Miami as somehow a land apart had everything to do with the city's history of transnationalism and immigration and its connection with the Americas to the south. The article makes reference to "a handful of ragged Cuban refugees, living in a tent pitched beneath a highway overpass," argues that "Next to crime and drugs, South Florida's most pressing problem is refugees," and notes that "a tidal wave of refugees have slammed into South Florida with the destructive power of a hurricane."[33] After a barrage of information about drug trafficking, murder, and violent crime, the article

32 John F. Stack, Jr. and Christopher L. Warren, "The Reform Tradition and Ethnic Politics: Metropolitan Miami Confronts the 1990s," in *Miami Now!*, ed. Guillermo J. Grenier and Alex Stepick III (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992), 160-185.
33 Kelly, "South Florida: Trouble in Paradise"

claims that "the Latins are gradually turning the region into their own colony" and pins much of the city's crime and other problems specifically on the marielitos:

> The 125,000 Marielitos who fled Cuba last year have strained the area's economy and aggravated its racial tensions, perhaps irretrievably. Nothing infuriates South Floridians as much as the deeds of the convicts and mental patients Castro sent along with the rest of the fleeing Cubans. Officials estimate that as many as 5,000 Marielitos are hard-core criminals. This year 53 refugees have been arrested in Miami for murder, and many more have been jailed for rapes and robberies. Fifty-one Marielitos themselves have been killed in Miami this year, most of them by other Marielitos. More than a quarter of those in Dade County jails are refugees.[34]

The cover then visually reinforced the message that Miami's problems stemmed mostly from the marielitos and other poor refugees from the Caribbean and from South and Central America (Figure 2). Echoing old graphic postcards, the cover includes a drawn outline of Florida overlain with the question "Paradise Lost?" and vintage-style lettering spelling out "South Florida." Inside each of these letters is an image drawn not from the standard stock of postcard beach scenes but straight from the headlines: a man, yelling, pinned behind a chain-link fence; a Coast Guard ship at sea; a darker, resigned man, chin in hand, eyes cast sadly downward; the shoreline, empty and waiting. By drawing on the imagery of tourism but then replacing typically sunny scenes with bodies in distress, the magazine's graphics team delivers a stark and serious message: immigrants and refugees are not now contributing to the livelihood of South Florida but are, on the contrary, spoiling, ruining, and draining the resources of the city and, by extension, the nation as a whole.

34 Kelly, "South Florida: Trouble in Paradise"

Often times playing on racial prejudices, these negative images infuriated many in the pre-Mariel Cuban community, especially as they continued to be reinforced throughout the 1990s and into the early years of the 21st century, though the debate became less solely focused on the marielitos and more focused on the Spanish-speaking community in Miami in general. In a reprisal of its infamous 1981 article, *Time* magazine in 2006 again called attention to Miami's problems, brazenly noting that Miami is "a greedy city," that is so corrupt and stratified that "Immigrants from other countries, especially Latin America, are the only reason Miami's population is still growing." While the article never directly pins the city's troubles on its immigrant population, the subtext of the article is that native-born U.S. citizens are leaving the city in droves because the city's immigrant population has rendered it unrecognizable as an "American" city. As one interviewee declares, "If the rest of the country was based on the same out-of-whack economic-fluid levels Miami's on these days, America would be a Third World banana republic." The implication here is that Miami is quite literally a city outside of the United States, belonging not to the U.S. but to the realm of poorer nations because of its nature as an immigrant city.[35] A week after the article's publication, U.S. Representative Tom Tancredo directly cited immigration as the cause of the city's economic troubles in one of his many Nativist tirades: "Look at what has happened to Miami. It has become a Third World country. You just pick it up and take it and move it someplace. You would never

35 Tim Padgett, "Letter from Miami: There's Trouble—Lots of It—in Paradise." *Time*, November 19, 2006.

know you're in the United States of America."[36] Tancredo's statements and *Time* magazine's suggestions are reflective of the general timbre of the national immigration debate at the time of the Freedom Tower's restoration, and statements such as these influenced the ways in which the Cuban community sought to identify itself as a group of privileged and preferred immigrants more akin to European migrant groups than groups from elsewhere in Latin America.

Whereas earlier Cuban immigrant groups had been portrayed as Spanish-speaking but not necessarily in the same negative ways that other Spanish-speaking migrant groups had been depicted, after Mariel this was no longer the case. The wealthier, dominant segment of earlier post-Castro Cuban migrants then began to defend and define for themselves an identity that did not carry with it the markers that had by the early 2000s been assigned to other Spanish-speaking immigrant groups. Telling in this regard is the popular bumper sticker slogan "*No Me Digas Hispano, Soy Cubano*" (Don't call me Hispanic—I'm Cuban) that was seen around Miami in the 1990s.[37] This slogan indicates an attempt on the part of particular members of the Cuban American community to separate themselves from the more broadly conceived "Hispanic" community in the United States. Written in Spanish, it declares Cuban identity to be un-Hispanic or otherwise separate from that of other Spanish-speaking immigrants.

It is important here to note that the national debate over immigration in general was also in flux during this time, and so many first wave Cuban migrants sought to

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36 Sean Alfano, "GOP Rep. Calls Miami 'Third World Country,'" CBSNews.com, November 30, 2006, http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/11/30/politics/main2217944.shtml.

37 Croucher, 56.

establish a Cuban identity that was distinct from and different than the figure of the Spanish-speaking or Hispanic immigrant. While immigration in the United States has always been a contested issue, and while the late twentieth century is certainly not the first time that immigration from Mexico and other Spanish-speaking nations entered the public consciousness, the debate at this time was particularly rancorous. Otto Santa Ana, in his 2002 book *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphors of Latinos in Contemporary American Public Discourse*, argues that a string of negatively loaded metaphors dominated media coverage of Latino immigration beginning in the early 1990s. This loaded language, he notes, led to actual, concrete legislative action. Leo R. Chavez agrees, writing in *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* that media coverage of various spectacles concerning Latino immigration served further to paint Latino immigrants as a threatening force.[38] Words, then, are powerful, and the ways in which the media framed and continues to frame Latino migrants has actual social and legislative ramifications.

The national attention drawn to the Cuban community by the aforementioned Mariel boatlift and these renewed debates over immigration, forced many Cuban Americans to reevaluate their own identities within the United States and encouraged the creation of a more positive, Euroamerican identity within this same timeframe. Mercedes Cros Sandoval concludes that, in the wake of the media coverage surrounding Mariel, many already established Cuban Americans "inwardly blamed the Marielitos for

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[38] Otto Santa Ana, *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphors of Latinos in Contemporary American Public Discourse* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Leo R. Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2008).

shattering the romantic ideal they had so arduously preserved of Cuba and the Cubans."[39] In other words, the Mariel migration did more than just explicitly alter the perceived identity of Cubans in the United States; these new Cuban migrants, and the media story surrounding them, forced the earlier immigrants to reckon with the realities of contemporary life on the island and brought to the fore those negative images and occurrences that had been left out of the immigrants' nostalgic reconstructions of pre-Castro Cuban life. Too, perhaps, the Mariel incident, occurring more than twenty years after Castro's revolution, reminded the migrants just how much time had passed since their own exodus and just how much had changed—and not changed—in that time. Miami, by then, had a heavy Cuban presence, and many of the early migrants had by that time lived much of their lives off of the island. The commemoration of their initial journey in the form of an official monument, then, also served to mark this no-longer-new place as home.

[39] Cros Sandoval, 12.

Reframing the Freedom Tower: Identity Formation as Reflected in the Designation of a National Historic Landmark

The 2007 rhetoric surrounding the official designation of the Freedom Tower as a monument is thus both a reflection of the Cuban exile elite's attempt to reassert the preeminence of wealthy, white Cuban migrants amidst a renewed national outcry over immigration and in reaction to challenges to Cuban American identity. This public memory surrounding this building is not, as some claim, universal to the exile experience. Rather, it marks a very specific period of Cuban migration that ended prior to the Mariel boatlift of the early 1980s. The demographics of the population served by the Freedom Tower are notably different from the demographics of later migrant waves—at least in popular perception. Overwhelmingly white and middle-class, this early group of exiles is, through the Freedom Tower, proclaiming their primacy among Miami's immigrant populations—both Cuban and non—and attempting to redefine the immigrant community in South Florida. In short, solidifying a more Euroamerican identity was a way for the Cuban community to separate itself from other migrant groups and, further, for the Cuban elite to separate itself from the marielitos.

Within a national context of growing anti-immigrant fervor, the drafters of the Miami Freedom Tower's application to become a National Historic Landmark sought to reinforce that, within the earlier context of the Cold War, the Cuban migrants were not ungracious intruders but, rather, welcome and indeed invited symbols of democracy's supremacy. The report, a standard, publicly available document that provides an official

historic overview of the tower and attempts to substantiate and argue for the tower's designation as an historically significant site worthy of preservation, indicates that "the building stands as a physical manifestation of Cold War era politics," further noting that "the center was born from a need by the United States to aid those who were seeking asylum from a communist regime that took root only ninety miles from its shores, thus reinforcing the United States' ideological struggle against communism."[40] With this very careful manipulation of syntax and diction, the drafters of this document assign agency to the United States government, making sure to claim that the Cuban Assistance Center was born not from the needs of a sudden influx of immigrants but because the very nature of U.S. democracy depended on the nation's offering of assistance to these ideological refugees. Forgoing subtlety, the form states that "the welcoming of the Cuban exile community was a matter of national policy," reinforcing that it was not that the United States reluctantly allowed this group of migrants to stay—rather, the government welcomed, invited, and encouraged the migration of communism's dissidents.[41]

The drafters of this document further distinguish their particular group of early Cuban migrants from what had by then become the popular conception of the Spanish-speaking immigrant by asserting the ideological motivations behind the Cuban exodus. "Miami's Freedom Tower," the document asserts, "processed Cubans who came as political exiles rather than immigrants…As a result, the Cuban exodus was viewed unlike

40Uguccioni and de la Vega, 4-17.
41Uguccioni and de la Vega, 12.

any previous wave of immigration."[42] Here, this document's authors are careful not to link the exiles with an economically motivated migration, noting that the sole reason for their entrance into the United States was their *philosophical* inability to live within the communist system.

Further, the Freedom Tower and the migrants themselves are portrayed as fully accepting of and even embodying American ideals. Claiming that the Freedom Tower "remains a national symbol of the liberty sought and found by Cuban refugees who came to America," the document reinforces the notion that the Cuban migrants were, in direct contrast to the rhetoric surrounding illegal immigration during the years of the tower's restoration, not foreign invaders but people very much in tune with and accepting of American ideals.[43] "The building," the form proclaims (and by extension the refugees the building represents), "has become an icon representing the faith that democracy brought to troubled lives, the generosity of the American people and a hopeful beginning that assured thousands a new life in a new land." [44] By emphasizing the 'generosity of the American people,' this statement reinforces the notion that these migrants did not force themselves upon an unwilling nation but, rather, were welcomed and accepted as ideologically aligned refugees.

Interestingly—and not coincidentally—the rhetoric here used to describe the Freedom Tower recalls the rhetoric surrounding another immigrant symbol that has become in turn representative of United States democracy: the Statue of Liberty. While

42 Uguccioni and de la Vega, 12.
43 Uguccioni and de la Vega, 23.
44 Uguccioni and de la Vega, 13.

not directly referencing the statue, the document very clearly relates the Freedom Tower to the statue's offshoot, Ellis Island, establishing a connection between the recent waves of Cuban immigration and prior waves of European migrants. Linking the Freedom Tower to Ellis Island in the east and Angel Island in the west, the form places the Cuban migration within a broader context of immigrant waves now accepted and celebrated as crucial contributors to United States history.[45] Most intriguing, though, is that the writers of the form, and, presumably, the interviews and articles they drew from, never linked Cuban immigration to other migrations from Spanish-speaking countries or other islands in the Caribbean. Repeatedly asserting that the Cuban migrants were exiles and not immigrants and claiming throughout that the Freedom Tower is the "Ellis Island of the South," they instead chose to link Cuban immigration to a primarily European precedent, further whitewashing the Cuban exile population.

This whitewashing (or, rather, this privileging of the experiences of white immigrants) is less subtle elsewhere in the document. "Droves of white upper and middle-class Cubans fearing imprisonment, violence, or worse, fled the country leaving their possessions behind," the form states.[46] True, the migrants from this period were overwhelmingly white and from the upper and middle classes. However, by claiming that these migrants represent the majority of the Cuban exile community, and by repeatedly noting that the Freedom Tower "is the single most significant building related to the

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[45] Uguccioni and de la Vega, 12; Also, it should be noted that Uguccioni and de la Vega do acknowledge the less-than-pleasant history of Angel Island. The mention of the location at all is brief and perfunctory, and much more attention is focused on the comparison to Ellis Island.

[46] Uguccioni and de la Vega, 17.

Cuban exodus to America," the monument and its museum reinforce the primacy of the white Cuban exiles of the early immigrant waves. These assertions also serve to establish Cuban immigration as wholly different from the immigration often debated on a national scale.

Adding to this presentation of an upper-class, Europeanized immigrant group are the continued assurances that the Cuban immigrants assisted at the Freedom Tower were educated and independently wealthy. These migrants, it is emphasized, sought not to live off of the American government but to contribute positively to the U.S. economy and "achiev[e] self-sufficiency in the United States."[47] Noting that many of these early migrants were professionals in Cuba and that this early wave of immigration "was comprised of the wealthier classes, who were highly educated," the rhetoric of the document reinforces the self-presentation of a Cuban community that is demographically different from the poorer immigrant groups portrayed in the U.S. press, capable of assimilating seamlessly into U.S. economy and society.

In many ways, it is suggested that these migrants will have no trouble fitting within the United States because Cuba itself was so closely linked to the United States historically and culturally as well as ideologically. By emphasizing the common Spanish roots of both geographic areas, the form's drafters note the ongoing and historical relationship between Cuba and Florida. Describing the relationship as "amicable and mutually beneficial," the drafters of this form note both the geographic and cultural closeness of the two landmasses. "Some Cuban families sent their children to school in

47 Uguccioni and de la Vega, 20.

Miami," the form notes, and, in an attempt to prove the cultural closeness of the two regions, further reminds readers that the University of Miami and the University of Havana used to play football against one another.[48] By mentioning football and noting that these universities had long-established cultural ties, the form emphasizes the closeness between Cuba and the United States and further promotes Cubans as familiar with and practiced in cultural forms prominent in the United States.

Perhaps most strikingly, the form directly and specifically seeks to separate Cuban migrants from other Latin American immigrant groups. "The huge influx of Latins in South Florida has created tensions and sometimes quarrelsome ethnic relations, causing the flight of many Anglos to neighboring communities and the development of an entirely new demographic profile," it acknowledges. Then, immediately, the form establishes distance between these tension-causing groups and asserts that the Cuban exile community, though from the same geographic region, is not a negative but a positive force in the United States: "The Cuban exile community, however, has made significant contributions to the United States in general, and Miami has become a major international community in large part due to its transformation as a result of the influx of Cuban refugees."[49] Here, the form explicitly reflects the attempt to contrast Cuban identity with the newly dominant media images of other immigrant groups from South America, Central America, and the Caribbean.

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[48] Uguccioni and de la Vega, 16.
[49] Uguccioni and de la Vega, 12

And this form is not the only place where these sentiments are expressed. In a 2001 article describing the planned renovation of the structure, architect (and Cuban migrant) Raul Rodriguez noted that his work on the tower is the most historically significant in his career to date and that the restoration would allow the Freedom Tower to take "its proper place in Miami's skyline."[50] Rodriguez reinforces the notion that this physical manifestation of Miami's exile community deserves a firm, concrete place in the city's skyline because the exiles themselves have established firm, concrete roots in the United States. Additionally, an article published by the National Park service in 2008 echoes the reminder that the tower's establishment as a processing center for Cuban refugees demonstrates that the Cold War-era policies of the United States government demanded that these migrants be assisted, and other editorials reiterate the tower's significance within the exile community, one even claiming that "everybody in the community has a soft spot for the tower." [51] Again, what is crucial here is not that the claims for the tower's importance are false—for the building is indeed intensely significant to many. What matters are the claims that it stands for a *universal* migrant experience; this is simply not the case, and the proclamation that the immigrants of Miami are wholly defined by this tower erases and marginalizes the experiences of migrants from other nations, of other races, and of different socioeconomic classes.[52]

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[50] Rachel Mansour, "Local Firm Rescues Crumbling Freedom Tower," *The Daily Record*. March 9, 2001.

[51] National Park Service, "Beacon of Hope: Miami's Newly Landmarked Treasure Faces a Bright Future," *Common Ground,* Winter 2008; "Fighting for the Freedom Tower: Team Returns Historic Miami Structure to its Original Glory," *Southeast Construction Magazine*, February 2002.

[52] Of course, this assertion is not the rhetorical product of the Cuban exile elite acting alone. As the Miami metropolitan area itself attempts to define its own identity, it draws on the city's "Latin" associations (the

Conclusion

"We should beware forgetting the enslavement or domination that persists and that often masquerades as emancipation or freedom."

—Avery F. Gordon[53]

The way the story of the Miami Freedom Tower is presented is dangerous not because this history is necessarily false or because the remarkable persistence and success of many Cuban migrants is not noteworthy, but because the rhetoric obscures the identities and experiences of those who do not fit within the given narrative. Though the story involves the privileging of certain racial and class distinctions, it is by no means solely a story of attempted subordination and supremacy. Rather, it is a nuanced tale involving the heartbreak and alienation of exile, the acceptance of a generations-long remove, and an existential desire to create a home apart from the homeland. "I have realized that the exile has no place anywhere," writes Cuban novelist Reinaldo Arenas, "because there is no place, because the place where we started to dream, where we discovered the natural world around us, read our first book, loved for the first time, is always the world of our dreams."[54] The Miami Freedom Tower, then, as a marker of place and an official declaration of identity, is indeed significant to those for whom its marbled halls marked the beginning of their Miami story. It is a physical marker of the

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official tourism website heavily uses the term "Miami Spice") while simultaneously negating the concrete markers of ethnic identity that might render those associations less-than-positive. A generic ethnic flavor is emphasized while many of the communities that actually comprise the diverse population are made invisible or spoken of in solely generic terms. The city, then, becomes tropicalized without becoming racialized, where beaches are tourist sites for tanning and not the landing strip for immigrants.

53 Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 184.

54 de la Torre, *La Lucha for Cuba: Religion and Politics on the Streets of Miami*, 56.

past to a group of people whose past is often physically intangible, a constructed place to serve as a beacon and a reminder to a displaced people.

Yet, even acknowledging this, the story of the Freedom Tower's National Landmark designation is still a story with far-reaching racial and socioeconomic implications that are dangerous to ignore. In a community with such a diverse range of peoples, the official recognition of one people in particular further others those groups without the political and economic clout to solidify their own place among the city's elite institutions. Miami's South and Central American migrant communities and Afro-Caribbean communities thus become populations with an absent sort of presence, a presence that is not defined or privileged or officially acknowledged as positive or politically powerful but, rather, pushed to the background and relegated to the shadows. As Miguel de la Torre, Cuban exile and Miami citizen, explains, "Just as when 'outsiders' constructed Cuban history, thereby oppressing Cubans under the colonial gaze, so too does the construction of history by Cuban 'insiders' oppress all that is Other to the Cuban elite."[55]

What better symbol for this exclusionary 'colonial gaze' than a tower, a former lighthouse, built in the style of the original Spanish colonizers? The tower is both a literal and figurative 'construction of history': It is at once an historically significant building located on a specific site and also a nostalgic fabrication built from and for a selective memory. The choice of a tower itself as a monument, rather than a statue or plaque or intangible day of commemoration, is significant. Towers project importance, and power.

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[55] de la Torre, 82.

They are exclusive. Towers literally loom overhead, taller than any singular person could ever be and a testament to the combined efforts and finances of many. In a city partially defined by a skyline, the official designation of a portion of that skyline as a monument to a particular group positions that group's identity as substantial and important. In this symbolic space, the members of the Cuban elite have the power to allow and exclude whomever they wish and thus the power to construct their own vision of the Cuban exile community.

This vision was defined primarily in reaction to the ways in which constructions of Cuban identity within the United States were challenged in the wake of the Mariel boatlift and within the context of debates over immigration in the 1980s and 1990s. Aware that their own privileged identity was disappearing and that their perceived identity within the United States was changing from welcome ideological exile to unknown immigrant, wealthy Cuban Americans who had emigrated from Cuba in the early years following Castro's takeover sought to reassert their own primacy both within the Cuban American community and amongst other Spanish-speaking immigrant groups. To do so, they used their own compelling historical narrative, a narrative reflected in the rhetoric surrounding the establishment of the Miami Freedom Tower as a National Historic Landmark. The tower, and the story it projects, establishes a difference and encodes the distance between the early Cuban migrants and those who followed.

These powerful first and second wave Cuban Americans were also aided by forces more subtle and much more pervasive. Spanish-speaking and immigrant Americans are often in the United States assigned pan-national identities that obfuscate

the social distinctions that are present in their countries of origin. As such, each member of the group is wrongfully taken to be representative of the group as a whole. The Miami Freedom Tower demonstrates, though, that it is no longer productive to classify large swaths of people in sweeping, general terms and assume that, because two people share a common language, they also share common views and similar histories. It would be easy, but inaccurate, to claim that the large Spanish-speaking community in Miami is somehow unified or uniformly possessed of the same ideals. Easy, too, to declare that this inclusion of Cubans among the cultural, political, and economic elite of one of the nation's largest cities signals the death of racism in South Florida, is an uncontested victory for all Latinos in the United States. These sorts of generalizations do little more than reinforce the racial and class hierarchies of an already fragmented American (broadly speaking) social structure.

Although it is obviously and intensely true that "Hispanic" peoples within the United States and in the wider Americas have been subjected to much wrongful discrimination and prejudice, it is equally true that not all Spanish-speaking people within the Americas have suffered the same way, and it is important to be aware of this crucial distinction when discussing structures of oppression within a transnational United States. Cuba, like the United States and most of the Atlantic world, was subject to European colonization and has a long history of enslavement and racial discrimination. Racially based and historically established social hierarchies exist within these nations as well, and as more and more people move to the United States from these formerly colonized regions, it is necessary to remember that these stratifications exist and be aware of how

they are manifest. In *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History,* Dolores Hayden contends that surface diversity is not enough, and that superficial displays of inclusion in the cityscape belie the issues that are present in diverse cities. "Change is not simply a matter of acknowledging diversity or correcting a traditional bias toward the architectural legacy of wealth and power," she says, "It is not enough to add on a few African American or Native American projects, or a few women's projects, and assume that preserving urban history is handled well in the United States." [56] Indeed, to point to the Miami Freedom Tower as an example of an inclusionary urban space is to miss the point. To assume that, because it is a marker of identity for a group of Spanish-speaking Cubans, the Freedom Tower is a voice for every Spanish speaker in Miami ignores the actual divisions within the city and within the city's Spanish-speaking population. When placed in conversation with the actual debates occurring within the Cuban American community after Mariel, this ignorance of social divisions within the city is particularly troubling because it serves to further oppress those who, first in Cuba itself and then in the United States, remain subjugated.

Discrimination toward and exclusion of Hispanic migrants is a real and substantial social issue. It is undeniable that the Spanish-speaking community as a whole is and has been marginalized within the United States. However, distinctions must be drawn between the way these structures and patterns of oppression operate within individual national migrant groups and within the broad United States as a whole. Those

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[56] Dolores Hayden, *Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 8.

in the Cuban American community who continually attempt to draw a division between themselves and other migrants who share either a language or a common regional origin do so by drawing on their own historically established position of privilege. In this way, they occupy an interesting position as they are simultaneously battling against forces of oppression while remaining, in many ways, repressive themselves. In order to establish themselves as separate, they further oppress those from whom they have historically been socioeconomically separate from. The establishment of the Miami Freedom tower as a memorial site is thus not a counter to racism in the United States broadly conceived but is, rather, an assertion that a particular community is not part of a raced population despite societal claims to the contrary. When viewed from outside the community, however, all that is evident is that members of what is considered to be a traditionally oppressed group have carved out a physical, powerful place within a large urban area in the United States. Terming the Miami Freedom Tower a place of inclusive acceptance paradoxically subjugates those whom the tower's designation as a National Historic Landmark was meant to exclude.

Like buildings, racial, ethnic, and national identities are constructed in a particular way at a particular time in order to reflect a particular vision. These identities are constructed by those with the means and the power to do so. The ways in which the identities of immigrant groups are framed directly affects how those groups are then received and are able to re-form within the United States. It is crucial, then, to pay careful attention not just to social structures that already exist but also to those that we create and reinforce with the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic stories that we construct about

particular immigrant groups. T.D. Allman, in his book *Miami: City of the Future*, speculates that Miami is a harbinger of things to come for the rest of the United States. "Every major national transformation the United States is undergoing," he writes, "has converged on Miami. How Miami solves, or fails to solve, those problems cannot but provide clues as to how the whole country will cope with the massive changes—full of both peril and opportunity—that are transforming the lives of us all."[57] These so-called problems, the confrontations of ethnic, racial, and national identities and the social hierarchies that evolve and potentially oppress, are embodied in the story of the Miami Freedom Tower. It is a story of architecture, but of architecture as reflective of and embodying language, for it is not the structure of the building itself but the structures of the surrounding social landscape that imbue the Miami Freedom Tower with an oppressive power.

The story of the Miami Freedom Tower is about both site and sight—it is about being grounded in a specific place but also about visibility and power within a community. It is about the forceful presentation of a carefully crafted identity both within the context of the social and racial politics of the United States and within the construct of preexisting Cuban and Caribbean social structures. It is equally the story of a longing for a tangible piece of a past and a reminder that groups are never as unified or easily defined as United States conceptions of race, nationality, and ethnicity may paint them to be. The building is at once a beacon and a fortress. To some, the focus of the tower is upward, on the building's rise, its sheer height, and its unique architecture: symbols of

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[57] T.D. Allman, *Miami: City of the Future* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987), 17.

the growth and power of the Cuban exile community, reminders of struggles and of sacrifice. To others, the focus is street-level, where the tower's thin and graceful middle descends into nothing more than a block of concrete. In reality, both vantage points are valid, and co-exist as a reminder of the complexity of Cuban identity itself.

Appendix A: Figures and Illustrations

Figure 1: Miami Freedom Tower

Courtesy National Trust for Historic Preservation

Figure 2: *Time* Magazine Cover, November 23, 1981

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